

## Document Citation

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*The Lonedale Operator* (1911) drives to its climax even more excitingly. The whole film shows a surer and more fluid technique than *Lonely Villa*. The exposition, establishing the relationship of the girl and her beau, establishing that he is a railroad engineer and she a telegraph operator, is much clearer and more detailed than the exposition in the earlier film. The acting is much quieter, much more natural than in *Villa*; the scene in which he proposes to her is humanly credible and warmly touching. Griffith captures the girl's spirit and her joy as she unexpectedly leaps on one of the railroad tracks and walks, tightrope-style, on the track while she talks to her beau. As soon as she and the beau separate, he to his engine and she to her telegraph office, Griffith builds toward the climax with a series of fluid match-cuts showing her entering the office and setting to work. Once the attack begins on her and her office, Griffith begins his relentless and rhythmic cross-cutting, which alternates between three clearly established locales—the attacker on the outside trying to get into the office, the operator inside the office trying to protect herself from the assault, the speeding train (traveling shot) on its way to answer the distress signal that the operator intelligently wired to the next station. Griffith cuts quicker and quicker from outside to inside to train, outside, inside, train, until the beau arrives just in time to find his sweetheart holding the culprit at bay with a wrench she has disguised as a pistol. The girl has brains as well as energy.

Both of these films are pure stories of suspense with very similar devices, although the later one has more human detail, a greater realistic texture, and stronger narrative construction. Much more human still is *The New York Hat* (1912), which dispenses with the melodramatic, suspenseful rescue altogether. With a screenplay by Anita Loos (her first, for which she received \$15 and an offer to write more), featuring Mary Pickford and Lionel Barrymore, *The New York Hat* is the story of the birth of love. Young Mary longs to escape her drab life and clothing, to attract a gentleman's eye. The young reverend of the parish buys her a stylish hat from New York that she fancies. The town biddies start gossiping,

linking Mary and the reverend in sin. He finally silences their talk with a letter from Mary's dying mother asking him to look after the girl. He takes advantage of this opportunity to declare his romantic intentions; she accepts his proposal of marriage.

Griffith puts human flesh on the story's potentially bare bones. To establish Mary's longing for a hat, Griffith breaks down an expositional scene between Mary and her father into two different setups, alternating between a medium two-shot (a shot with two equally important figures) that includes both Mary and her father and a close-up of Mary alone making wistful faces in a mirror. The two alternating setups in the scene establish the crucial emotional premise of the exposition—the gulf between Mary's little-girl relationship with her moralistic father and Mary's womanly longing to be pretty. And Griffith makes the mirror a key leitmotif of the film, for when Mary finally gets her hat, she returns to the mirror (and the camera to precisely the same setup) to see how charming she looks. Griffith similarly breaks the hat-buying scene into several setups: from Mary's point of view (desiring the hat), from the reverend's point of view (seeing she wants the hat), and then a close two-shot when he makes the purchase, bringing their two heads together, instantly suggesting the direction of their affections.

The film is full of other sensitive human touches. Mary's faces in the mirror are coy and charming; the ugly, snide town gossips are perfect comic caricatures. Griffith would draw fuller portraits of these comic, nasty ladies in *Intolerance* and *Way Down East*.



THE NEW YORK HAT:  
the gentlemen thumb  
their noses at the gos-  
sipy matrons.



## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MOVIES

Most personal of all in the film is the disdainful masculine flick of the head that the all-male church elders give, in unison, to the gossipy ladies after their reverend has washed the taint of sin from his relationship with Mary. Griffith is also thumbing his own nose at these morally near-sighted ladies of reform and "uplift."

With a film like *The New York Hat*, Griffith had gone as far and as deeply as he could with the ten-minute picture. Those five years of one-reel films show Griffith laying the foundation not only for his technical achievements but also for the themes and motifs that would dominate his later films. He had made films about periods of American history (i.e., *1776*, or *The Hessian Renegades*), films about the contemporary social problems of poverty and vice (i.e., *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*), films that were stylistically careful adaptations of literary classics (Shakespeare, Browning, Longfellow) and contemporary novels (Frank Norris, Helen Hunt Jackson). Although no member of the audience yet knew Griffith's name (no Patent Company director or actor received screen credit until after 1912), they all knew that Biograph pictures were the best on the market. But by 1913, Griffith wanted to break loose from the one-reel limit on his thoughts. He had earlier made two-reel films, but the General Film Company insisted on releasing them in two parts, one reel at a time. Now that Griffith had discovered how to say things in the cinematic form, he found he had things he wanted to say.